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International Exhibit on Lawyers Under Nazi Regime on Display at RWU Law

'Lawyers Without Rights' exhibition, co-sponsored by American and German bar associations, portrays persecution of Jewish lawyers and judges during Nazi era



July 20, 2015 | Public Affairs Staff

BRISTOL, R.I. – Through a series of deeply researched stories, historic photographs and more, a highly acclaimed international exhibit coming to Roger Williams University School of Law will provide a portrait of the fate of Jewish lawyers and judges in Germany under the Nazi regime, and how the Nazis purged Jewish lawyers as one of the early steps to attack the rule of law in their country.

From July 30 through Aug. 31, RWU Law will host the exhibit, *Lawyers Without Rights: Jewish Lawyers in Germany Under the Third Reich*. The exhibit will be on display Monday through Friday, from 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.; it will be closed for the holiday on Monday, Aug. 10. From here, it will travel to the U.S. District Court in Providence from Sept. 8 through Oct. 2.

The exhibit was created by the German Federal Bar, in cooperation with the American Bar Association, and has shown in dozens of cities in the U.S., Germany and throughout the world.

"The School of Law is honored to host this important exhibit, which covers a dark and troubling episode in human history," says RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky. "Perhaps most importantly, it gives us the chance to view the Holocaust through the lens of people just like us – lawyers and judges –

which may deepen our sensitivity to the sometimes unfathomable horror of the Holocaust and move us to recommit ourselves to living up to the promise and potential of the legal profession.”

“The United States District Court is proud to partner with RWU Law in bringing this important exhibit to Rhode Island,” adds Chief Judge William E. Smith. “It is the rule of law, through the work of lawyers and judges, that protects and preserves the rights and liberties that we all enjoy as United States citizens.”

The idea for the exhibit was conceived in 1998 when an Israeli lawyer asked the regional bar of Berlin for a list of Jewish lawyers whose licenses had been revoked by the Nazi regime.

“The regional bar decided not only to research a list of names but also to try to find out more about the fates behind all those names,” says Axel Filges, president of the German Federal Bar. “Some were able to leave the country after the Nazis came into power, but very many of them were incarcerated or murdered. The non-Jewish German lawyers of those days remained silent. They failed miserably, and so did the lawyers’ organizations. We do not know why.”

After the Berlin bar transformed its research into an exhibit, other regional bars began asking whether they could show it and add their own research.

“So, like a puzzle, a portrait of the fate of Jewish lawyers in Germany has emerged step by step,” Filges says.

The exhibit’s Rhode Island sponsors hope that it sparks both personal reflection and public dialogue about the lessons of history and how they shed light on our current institutions and values.

“The Nazis’ attack on Jewish lawyers and judges reminds us that the rule of law is indispensable to a just society,” Yelnosky says. “Moreover, the failure of other members of the legal profession to come to the defense of their Jewish colleagues is a haunting reminder of the power of a violent dictator.”

Chief Judge Smith echoed Yelnosky’s thoughts on the importance of learning from historical events.

“This exhibit reminds us of the vulnerability of the rule of law in the face of oppression and terror, and that we all share in the responsibility to defend our cherished system. It is a stark and perhaps haunting reminder of our solemn obligations as lawyers, judges and citizens.”